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Onward Corporate Food Crusaders!



A passage from the late James Michener's historical novel *The Source*, dramatizes the Fourth Crusade in which Christian armies from Europe invade the Holy Land. One of Michener's protagonists is an ambitious nobleman whose main religious motivation is the acquisition of a fiefdom for himself (It seems there were no more to go around in Europe.) In his zeal for empire, he massacres thousands of native eastern Christians (as Crusaders actually did in their siege on Jerusalem). So much for the noble goals of crusades...

History has many ways of repeating itself. Last week at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the business leaders of the global corporate food regime announced a new Corporate Food Crusade.

Seventeen agrifood monopolies (ADM, BASF, Bunge, Cargill, The Coca-Cola Company, DuPont, General Mills, Kraft Foods, Metro, Monsanto Company, Nestlé, PepsiCo, SABMiller, Syngenta, Unilever, Wal-Mart Stores and Yara International) rolled out a new report financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation entitled "[Realizing a New Vision for Agriculture](#)."

The monopolies propose "mobilizing the private sector through market-based solutions... to empower farmers and entrepreneurs to reach their full potential." The report invites governments and civil society to join them in decreasing the portion of rural inhabitants living on less than \$1.25 a day by 20% over each of the next two decades. (This admirable goal is considerably less ambitious than the [Millennium Development goal](#) of halving, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day by 2015).

A companion report (also financed by Bill Gates) announces the [Business Alliance Against Chronic Hunger](#) (BAACH), an offshoot of the Davos group called the Global Agenda Council on Food Security. BAACH calls for business-led solutions to global hunger by expanding markets in agricultural inputs, retail outlets, and sourcing and production of high-value crops.

The question is, why should the private sector invest in global hunger?

"[The Next Billions: Business Strategies to Enhance Food Values Chains and Empower the Poor](#)" financed by (you guessed it) Bill Gates comes right out and says it:

Globally, 3.7 billion people are largely excluded from formal markets. This group, earning US\$8 a day or less, comprises the 'base of the pyramid' (BOP) in terms of economic levels. With an annual income of US\$2.3 trillion a year that has grown at 8% in recent years, this market spends US\$1.3 trillion a year on food. Around 70% of the BOP (2.5 billion people) depends on the food value chain for their incomes, either directly as small scale farmers and farm laborers, or indirectly as small scale entrepreneurs... The BOP represents a fast-growing consumer market.

The poor may not have much money, but since they are the fastest growing sector of the sagging global economy, they represent an important new market for the monopolies of the corporate food regime. Claims of "farmer and entrepreneur empowerment" need to be balanced with how well agribusiness and giant retail have "empowered" family farmers and local businesses in the US and around the world... Sooner or later, just about everyone ends up going out of business in the corporate race to the bottom line.

The flurry of reports coming out of Davos should come as no surprise. A new wave of global food riots has sparked serious rebellions in the autocratic regimes of Tunisia and Egypt. World leaders are worried that more food riots could lead to more political crises. After three years of failed "food summits" held by governments, the World Bank, FAO and UN, the World Economic Forum had to come up with something to offer the world. They invented the Corporate Food Crusade.

The problem is that the world's big banks, financial houses and agrifood monopolies thrive on the very [price volatility that brings about food rebellions](#). While these corporations talk a well-financed line about serving the poor, they need the poor (and lots of them) in order to help them out of their own crisis of accumulation. Thirty years of globalization has concentrated so much wealth at the top, corporations are having a hard time finding places to reinvest. Poverty (and speculation) is their last frontier. There is little historical evidence that this kind of colonization actually helps the poor in question.

The US government is hitching their wagon to the corporations. Rajiv Shah -- yes, Bill Gates' former employee and the head of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) -- returned from Davos gushing:

We are witnessing an unparalleled opportunity right now for innovative, large-scale private sector partnerships to achieve significant impact on global hunger and nutrition. USAID is committed to creating new public-private partnerships in Feed the Future focus countries to advance their national investment plans.

Shaw is desperate. His [Feed the Future Initiative](#) that hoped to commit \$22 billion in public funds is hopelessly underfunded with only \$925 million reportedly pledged in the World Bank's intermediary fund (Global Agriculture and Food Security Program). The real agenda is, of course, how to mobilize taxpayer support for public programs like Feed the Future and the [Global Food Security Act](#) to provide the infrastructure, consumer subsidies and extension services that the monopolies demand before making any real investments.

The sad irony is that over the last thirty years, [farmers movements](#) civil society in Asia, Latin America and Africa have built up solid [agroecological alternatives](#) to counter the expensive seed and fertilizer inputs being offered by agribusiness based on the concept of "[food sovereignty](#)"-- the right of people to determine their own food and agricultural systems. These methods are effectively resistant to climate change and are efficiently passed farmer-to-farmer with the help of NGOs, farmer organizations and sometimes, enlightened governments. Unfortunately even productive, sustainable farmers can't stand up to the juggernaut of "free trade" in which subsidized grains are sold at below the cost of production by monopolies like Cargill and ADM. The vast, diversified seed and cultivation systems in the hands of the world's small farmers already produce half of the world's food. The problem is these farmers -- mostly women -- don't have enough land and don't get paid enough at the time of harvest to make a good living. They end up selling their grains cheap, then buying them back at higher prices -- that's when they go hungry. They don't need more of corporate colonizing, they need more land and protection from dumping, land grabs and market monopolization.

Big business is on its way to the lands of the poor save small farmers. Like the crusaders of the 11th-13th centuries, the CEO noblepeople of the corporate food regime are searching for the new market fiefdoms they believe are rightfully theirs. Like the original Crusades (that among other things impoverished much of rural Europe) the consequences of the Corporate Food Crusade will stretch far beyond sub-Saharan Africa or Southeast Asia.

The Corporate Food Crusade has an Achilles' heel. Without the public subsidy to market expansion, corporations simply won't invest (That's why they sat on their laurels over the last three decades while hunger ballooned to 1 billion people... they were so busy dismantling the public sector they forgot they needed its taxpayer money). Whether or not the Crusade moves forward -- or whether [truly equitable and sustainable alternatives are supported](#) -- ultimately depends not on Bill Gates or the Davos crowd, but on people. Had the peasantry of Europe refused to walk to the Holy Land, the Crusades would never have happened. If the US taxpayers refuse to finance the Corporate Food Crusade, it won't happen at all.

